

ON TRACK WITH MDT

For the past several weeks, I have struggled with how to explain the needs of this state's transportation system to the public.

I more than anyone know how fortunate Montana is to have been treated kindly by the last two reauthorization bills: with TEA-21, for example, our annual Federal-aid allocation increased approximately \$100 million each year. Because we, like so many states, were faced with serious system-wide needs, those dollars were vital to maintaining our transportation infrastructure, and we have worked diligently toward that end for the past six years.

That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that we have a long list of system needs that go beyond our current level of funding – a list of unfunded projects that, as of September 30, totaled \$434.7 million. Please note that this list does not include projects for which we are seeking Congressional earmarks, i.e., the Billings and Kalispell bypasses and the Marysville and Ekalaka roads. We will continue applying for discretionary funds for these projects.

For those wondering how we came up with the \$434.7 million number, let me explain. Each year, MDT prepares a tentative construction program for the next five years, which means that the latest compilation addresses system needs through federal fiscal year 2008. Projects are tentatively programmed, based on need and dollars available, by district and category: Interstate Maintenance, or IM; National Highway System, or NHS; state secondary; and so forth. All projects in the tentative construction program are at some point in the preconstruction process and, at this point at least, we are juggling projects around each year in an effort to address the most urgent needs first.

So where do we stand in terms of our infrastructure? Overall, our interstate system is in pretty good shape. The real concern for the foreseeable future pertains to our NHS and secondary routes, for they bear the brunt of programmed projects with a shortfall of funds. And the bad news is that we are faced with having to push some of these projects back farther and farther.

Not surprisingly, that raises serious concerns for the traveling public. First, of course, there is the very real need to rehabilitate or reconstruct aging roads and provide what we consider an acceptable level of service for the next 20 to 30 years.

Second, there is the frustration we all experience when new concerns arise and we have to tell people that we can't even consider *x* or *y* until we can address some of the system needs already identified. When that happens, people tend to think that we are being bureaucratic or rigid or that we don't think a certain project is merited, but the truth is much more simple: we have projects already identified that have to take precedence. We will always be glad to address public concerns and incorporate new projects in to our long-range plan, but the reality is that we have many serious needs already identified, and we must address them first.

Now for the good news. Addressing those needs first could very well be made easier under the pending reauthorization, and we once again owe a debt of gratitude to our congressional delegation – and their highly capable staff – for their work toward that end: Senator Baucus for his work on the Environmental Public Works (EPW) Bill, Senator Burns for all of his help with appropriations, and Congressman Rehberg for the instrumental role he played in developing the House Transportation and Infrastructure (T and I) Bill. If recent reports are any indication, Montana could very well be blessed with another substantial increase in our federal allocation, which we will use diligently to address the needs discussed above. I want to thank Senator Baucus, Senator Burns, Congressman Rehberg and their staff for making this possible, and I encourage you to do the same.

If I could leave you with one thought, it would be that MDT remains committed to providing a quality transportation system. Doing so is key to staying “on track,” both with the traveling public and with all those who work so hard to make our state the great place it is.

Please travel safely this holiday season.

Dave Galt
Director